

Wildlife Resources Section

Game Management

Habitat Improvement

The Wildlife Resources Section conducts management activities on 73 wildlife management areas (WMAs) and 9 state forests totaling more than 444,500 acres. State land acquisition for 2002-03 included the purchase of 177 acres, including one new public access site.

An extensive wildlife management program is conducted on more than 1.1 million acres of national forest land located in West Virginia through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Forest Service and West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. State wildlife biologists devote most of their time reviewing national forest opportunity areas, timber sales, and provide technical input in the development of national forest plans. Management issues are closely reviewed to ensure that wildlife receives the maximum possible benefit.

Management on the 73 WMAs is directed toward improving wildlife habitat. Timber management was conducted on 18.5 acres with additional acreages in the planning stage.

Management activities on state and national forest lands included the planting of 1,640 trees and shrubs for food and cover, and the pruning, releasing and/or grafting of more than 590 individual trees and shrubs.

More than 2,720 acres of wildlife clearings were mowed and six acres of new clearings were established. Lime and/or fertilizer was applied to 87 acres and 369 acres were seeded to herbaceous vegetation. Prescribed burning was used to retard vegetation succession and improve the diversity and abundance of desirable plants on 42 acres. Sharecropping agreements with local farmers were signed on 1,836 acres to maintain open land. Seventy-three (73) waterholes were maintained to provide a year-round water supply for wildlife.

Water levels on 253 acres of wetlands were manipulated to encourage waterfowl use. Four hundred and eighty-six (486) waterfowl nest structures were maintained. Ninety-

one (91) nest structures were erected or maintained for other wildlife species.

More than 928 miles of roads and trails and 14 bridges were maintained. Road closures were installed or maintained at 536 sites to prevent disturbance to wildlife and to protect habitat.

Numerous information and regulation signs were erected or maintained. Five hundred and thirty-six (536) campsites, seven boat ramps, 22 shooting ranges, 28 physically challenged hunter access roads, 26 fisherman access sites, and 131 parking areas were maintained. One parking lot and one additional physically challenged hunter access site were developed. The highly successful controlled waterfowl hunting program at McClintic Wildlife Management Area continued to provide quality waterfowl hunting for West Virginia hunters. Approximately 41 waterfowl ponds and 22 waterfowl blinds are maintained on the area, including two waterfowl blinds for the physically challenged.

Wildlife Transplant Program

Twenty (20) nuisance bears were trapped and relocated to more remote areas. Several additional nuisance bears were destroyed or trapped and released on site.

Other numerous animal damage complaints were investigated and many of these animals were trapped and relocated.

Wildlife Population Surveys

Waterfowl surveys and census routes for woodcock (19) and mourning doves (10) were conducted in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Surveys were also conducted for bald eagles (7), river otter (109), and song birds. Seven hundred doves and 455 Canada geese were banded.

Harvest and biological data were compiled for hunter-killed turkey, beaver, bobcat, fisher, deer, bear, and wild boar.

Information and Education

Wildlife biologists devoted considerable time assisting

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conservation clubs, schools, community and civic clubs, Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs, sportsmen's clubs, nature tours, fairs, training schools, and National Hunting and Fishing Day activities. Cooperation was given to universities and colleges by serving as guest lecturers. More than 144 classes and lectures on conservation were presented and more than 100 sportsmen's groups meetings were attended. Numerous interviews were given to the TV, radio, and print media.

Regional meetings are conducted at 17 sites around the state each year in March to present proposed regulation changes to sportsmen. These meetings also provide the public an opportunity to make recommendations and ask questions.

Special youth hunting opportunities were conducted for waterfowl, squirrel, and white-tailed deer. The special youth hunts provide an excellent opportunity to introduce young people to the outdoors and the hunting tradition.

The WV State Wildlife Center continues to excel as an educational facility. More than 39,751 visitors and 30 group tours used the area's facilities and enjoyed viewing West Virginia wildlife.

Many of the challenges and issues facing the Wildlife Resources Section's Game Management and Game Management Services units are shared by other states and agencies. A number of regional, national, and international organizations exist to promote information exchange and multi-jurisdictional coordination. The Wildlife Resources Section is an active member/participant in many of these organizations and their various committees. Notable organizations include: Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Resource Agencies, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, The Wildlife Society, Atlantic Flyway Council, Southeast Deer Study Group, Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, and Eastern Management Unit Dove Technical Committee.

White-tailed Deer

West Virginia continues to be one of the favorite deer hunting grounds in the eastern United States. In 2002, hunt-

ers bagged 255,356 deer. These included 96,555 bucks, a 3 percent decrease from the 2001 harvest; 104,199 antlerless deer, an increase of 51 percent; 37,144 archery deer, an increase of 7 percent; and 17,458 muzzleloader deer, an increase of 23 percent. Nonseasonal mortalities were 27,069.

A bowhunter survey has been conducted annually since 1995. This cooperative venture with the West Virginia Bowhunters Association is an excellent means of monitoring populations of game animals and furbearers as well as providing a method for bowhunters to report their observations. The wild turkey fall harvest has been measured accurately six years in a row by the survey.

In 2002 the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources expanded deer hunting opportunities with several special hunts. Special deer hunts were held at the Greenbank National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO) and Blennerhassett Island State Park. Four cities took advantage of the urban archery season. Muzzleloading only buck hunts were held at Wilson Cove in Hardy County and Hillcrest WMA. Bucks harvested on McClintic WMA were restricted to a minimum spread of 14 inches. The Special Youth and Class Q Deer Season was a three day split season in October and December.

Black Bear

In 2002, a state record 1,362 bear were harvested. A record 729 bear were taken in bow season, 55 percent higher than the previous archery record of 470 set in 2001. The total kill in the five southern counties, Nicholas, Kanawha, Boone, Fayette, and Raleigh, during the early gun season with dogs and the first week of buck season without dogs was 219 bears. The harvest during the early November gun season with dogs was 134 bear, and hunters checked 414 bear during the late December gun season, bringing the total to 633 bear killed by gun. The low hard mast production in 2002 was a contributing factor in the record bear harvest for 2002.

A total of 134 nonseasonal bear deaths occurred in 2002, up about 60 percent from the 84 nonseasonal deaths recorded in 2001. Road kills continue as the leading cause of nonsea-

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sonal mortalities with 82. Nonseasonal deaths amounted to nine percent of total bear deaths.

The southern West Virginia black bear research study was designed to gather information on reproduction and the status of bears captured as nuisance animals. A three-day gun season in early November, with dogs, and one week of concurrent hunting without dogs during the first week of buck gun season were added to reduce bear populations in these counties. Prior to the 2002 hunting season there were 100 bears in the four study counties captured and tagged. Forty-six (46) of the 100 were radioed, four males and 42 females. Eighteen (18) of the 100 tagged bears were harvested; six females and three males were radioed. The 18 percent harvest rate this year is not believed to be high enough to stabilize the population. Field work will continue during the 2003 season.

Bear damage claims increased from 138 in 2001 to 210 in 2002. Landowners in 28 counties were paid \$102,344 in 2002, an increase from \$54,334 in 2001.

Wild Turkey

The survey of wild turkey broods is an important aid in forecasting the statewide harvests and changes in the wild turkey population. During the summer of 2002, the count (295) by Wildlife Resources personnel was 36 percent lower than the 2001 count and slightly lower than the 11-year average.

The 2002 spring gobbler harvest (13,385) was 25 percent lower than the 2001 record of 17,875 birds. There were a total of 30 counties open to fall hunting in 2002. There were no counties opened to limited permit hunting during the fall of 2002. The combined spring and fall harvest of 16,193 ranks as the seventh highest annual harvest recorded in West Virginia.

The 2002 Gobbler Survey was conducted jointly by the Wildlife Resources Section and the West Virginia Chapter of the Wild Turkey Federation. The survey serves as a means for hunters to report their observations and opinions about wild turkey management. During 2002, results were com-

piled from 305 hunters. Cooperators hunted 11,217 hours and heard 5,082 gobblers. The gobbling rate (45 gobblers heard per 100 hours) was lower than 2001 (77), and was 18 percent lower than the 20-year average. The survey showed that the best gobbling in 2002 occurred in the western and Eastern Panhandle counties.

Wild Boar

Hunters killed 38 wild boar during the 2002 season. This represents the third year in succession that harvests have declined. Bowhunters took nine during the October 12 through December 31 archery season. The early firearms harvest was three and, during the late season, 26 were killed.

Annual Mast Survey

Annually during August, cooperating personnel in the Division of Forestry and Division of Natural Resources rate the abundance of mast produced by selected tree and shrub species. Mast indices are then formulated for each species on a statewide and ecological region basis. This survey has been conducted since 1970 and is important information often requested by hunters. Mast abundance is also an important tool to forecast the annual big game harvests.

Mast abundance in 2001 was below average and unfortunately, 2002 mast conditions were worse than in 2001. There was some mast on the higher ridges, but overall acorn indices dropped as much as 30 percent for chestnut oak and 46 percent for black and red oak between years 2001 and 2002. The best news about mast conditions was that beech, hickory, black cherry, and blackberry produced well in 2002. The poor mast condition was a contributing factor in the record white-tailed deer and black bear bowhunter harvests because these big game species were more concentrated and easier to harvest than when food is more abundant.

Ruffed Grouse

Ruffed grouse hunters experienced poorer hunting for grouse during the 2002-2003 season than the previous year. Near record mast production during the fall of 2000 resulted in higher grouse production during the summer of 2001 and provided an increased number of birds for the hunter during the 2001-2002 season; however, brood production in 2002